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Self-regulation in interpersonal interactions

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Summary in English

Self-regulation means to change the self so as to bring it into line with some standards that can be chosen by the self or can be dictated by the environment. In the last three decades psychology has seen a remarkable blossoming of research on this topic which has extensively examined from an intrapersonal perspective. However, people do not live in a social vacuum. They often self-regulate while being surrounded by others. As a result, the way people self-regulate has many implications for interpersonal life and interpersonal life has many implications for self-regulation. Only in the past few years social psychology has started to recognize that self-regulatory processes and relationships dynamics are often intertwined. The present dissertation contributes to this recent line of research and examines the interplay between self-regulation and interpersonal processes. In this work, we have investigated the impact of two components of self-regulation, regulatory focus and self-control, on various interpersonal dynamics that play a key role in the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, such as interpersonal goal support, trust, and daily sacrifices. We have also examined the influence of close relationships on aspects of self-regulation, such as motivation and goal achievement.

The first two empirical chapters examined the role of regulatory focus theory on interpersonal goal support. When people are pursuing goals, they are often surrounded by others who can help or impair their goal accomplishment. With their advice, support, and suggestions others can have a significant impact in the way people approach goals. When is interpersonal goal support beneficial for the individual's goal accomplishment and when is not? Who is open and receptive to be helped? Who are the best partners to approach for support while pursuing goals? Regulatory focus theory can contribute to answer these questions. According to Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), people approach goals either a promotion or prevention-oriented way. When people are in a *promotion focus*, they are especially concerned with their dreams and aspirations (ideal self goals), and, in general, with the presence versus absence of positive outcomes. When people are in a *prevention focus*, they are especially concern with their duties and responsibilities (ought self goals), and, in general, with the presence versus absence of negative outcomes.

In Chapter 2, we sought to illuminate how regulatory focus affects the Michelangelo phenomenon, a process whereby partners support each other's goal pursuit and promote movement toward each person's ideal self. Ideal self goals represent promotion focus types of goals. Therefore, we predicted that goal regulatory congruence, or the match between people's regulatory focus (promotion focus) and the correspondent self-goals (ideal self goals) should facilitate partner goal support and target movement toward the goals. We used four complementary measurement techniques (all adopting a multilevel approach): (a) participants' self-reports of their own and the partner's everyday behaviors; (b) eight-day daily diary records of partner's behaviors; (c) participants' ratings of their own and the partner's behavior during laboratory conversations regarding each person's ideal goal pursuits; and (d) trained coders' ratings of target and partner behavior during conversations regarding each person's ideal goal pursuits. The within-participant and across-partner analyses showed that promotion orientation (both for the target and the partner) yields positive consequences for the Michelangelo Phenomenon. Promotion-oriented individuals elicited goal support from their partners and promotion-oriented partners were likely to exhibit goal support. Goal support, in turn, resulted in the individuals' movement toward their ideal self. Several mechanisms responsible for our findings were also tested and discussed. Prevention orientation (for both target and partner) was found to be irrelevant or weakly negatively related to the Michelangelo Phenomenon.

Chapter 2 investigated the influence of interpersonal goal support in a purely promotion-oriented context (ideal self goals) and mainly examined the benefits of a match between the individual's regulatory focus and the

type of goal at hand. In Chapter 3, we examined the benefits of interpersonal goal support that derive from another type of match: the fit between two individual's regulatory orientations. Specifically, we examined how the individual's goal pursuit is affected by advice and support received from a close other whose orientation fits (versus does not fit) the individual's orientation. We sought to investigate whether this type of interpersonal regulatory fit causes consequences for goal pursuit that parallel those of intrapersonal regulatory fit (e.g., feeling right, enhanced motivation and enjoyment). We also tested whether the motivational benefits of interpersonal regulatory fit were experienced by both promotion- and prevention-oriented individuals. Six studies consistently revealed that only promotion-oriented individuals profited from interpersonal regulatory fit and experienced motivational benefits when receiving goal related suggestions from promotion-oriented others. Prevention-oriented individuals did not profit from interpersonal regulatory fit. We assessed possible reasons why prevention-oriented individuals failed to experience benefits from interpersonal fit and found that prevention-oriented individuals are reluctant to seek interpersonal advice and they are not very receptive to it once they obtain this advice. Furthermore, prevention-oriented individuals do not recognize the similarities that they have with prevention-oriented partners and, consequently, fail to experience interpersonal regulatory fit.

Chapters 4 and 5 examined the impact of self-control strength on interpersonal processes such as trust and sacrifice. To change the self and exert self-control requires some power which is not unlimited. In fact, regulating the self depends on a limited resource that operates like a strength or energy and that weakens with each following self-control exertion (e.g. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). The state of reduction of self-control resources has been called ego depletion (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996) and can lead to self-control failure and impulsive behavior.

In Chapter 4 we focused on the interpersonal consequences of perceiving another person to be high or low in self-control strength. Specifically, in this chapter, we studied how the perception of another person's level of self-control affects trust in this person. We proposed and tested the hypothesis that in interactions between strangers and relationship partners, people detect the level of another person's self-control which, in turn, influences people's perception of her ability to act in a trustworthy manner. Results of four studies revealed that people can assess both another individual's dispositional self-control and another individual's temporary depletion of self-control, and that individuals who are perceived to be high in self-control are trusted more than individuals who are perceived to be low in self-control. Furthermore, our results revealed that in ongoing relationships people are more committed to high self-control others than to low self-control others, because they trust them to a greater extent. In interactions between strangers, however, people like high self-control others and low self-control others to a similar extent.

Chapter 5 focused on the role of self-control in people's decision to sacrifice for others. People in close relationships often encounter situations in which their interests are at odds with the interests of their partner: what is good for one partner is not good for the other, and individuals are forced to choose between pursuing their own interest and sacrificing for their partner's needs. Most of the daily sacrifices that people confront in close relationships are small, in that the partners' interests differ in minor ways. In this chapter we tested the role of self-control strength in the decision of sacrificing (or not) for a close other. Results of four studies revealed that the impulsive (low self-controlled) response to situations of small divergence of interests is to forego personal interest and instead opt to sacrifice for the close other and the relationship. We also examined one possible mechanism responsible for this effect. A small relationship threat, such as a situation of small divergence of interests, automatically activates and increases the goal of connectedness. We found that, because depleted participants relied on the contextualized activation of connectedness, they reported to be more willing to sacrifice for a close relationship partner than non-depleted participants. Finally, replicating previous research, we also found that low level of self-control decreased forgiveness and willingness to sacrifice for a non-close other.

The present dissertation has shown that in interpersonal settings the way each individual self-regulates is likely to exert an impact on both the interpersonal interaction and the way the other individual self-regulates. In the present work we have shown different ways in which this process may occur. In two empirical chapters we have shown the importance of promotion orientation for interpersonal goal support. Our findings show that others can help us to achieve our dreams. But when we look for support from others we should carefully evaluate whom to approach. We should not rely on just anyone. Partners, friends, or colleagues who focus on gains and ideal self goals are the type of support we should look for. At the same time, we should also be focused on gains and open and receptive to interpersonal support. With such an approach, we can maximize the beneficial impact of close others on our goal pursuit. In other two empirical chapters, we have shown that self-control has important implications for trust and sacrifice. Research demonstrates that, in most situations, self-control leads to good interpersonal behavior. Therefore, self-control is a meaningful characteristic to perceive in others in order to predict their behavior. Frequently, self-control helps people to behave in a prosocial way and that is why we tend to trust others who are high in self-control. However, we should not neglect the importance of the situation. While, in most situations, we can expect prosocial behavior from people who are high in self-control, our work shows that in other specific circumstances (e.g. when close others need to decide whether to engage in small sacrifices or not), self-control may stimulate attention to self-oriented concerns. Thus, our findings suggest that, in order to evaluate and predict other people's behavior, self-control is a characteristic to consider in relation to the context in which it is exerted. While research has only recently started to focus on the interplay between self-regulation and interpersonal processes, with our work we hope to have contributed to this developing field and to have shown the profound impact that self-regulatory processes can have on relationships and that relationships can have on self-regulatory processes.